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NEPTUNUS

REX: Naval Stories of the Normandy Invasion, June 6, 1944

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U.S. Navy Memorial Foundation*



PRESIDIO

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shell fragments and inserted a large tantalum plate. During the operation, Dr. Lipscomb reprimanded one of the assistants for humming "Blues in the Night." He found out, however, that it was I, trying to keep myself in a happy frame of mind.



Quartermaster (Signalman) Second Class
William DeFrates, U.S.
Naval Reserve.

"LET'S GET ON WITH IT!"

By Quartermaster (Signalman) Second Class William DeFrates, U.S. Naval Reserve. Adapted from unpublished manuscript.

I was a member of the 7th Beach Battalion. Like all the beach battalions, our mission was "to facilitate the ship to shore operation." Our five hundred men, who had trained together for months in Virginia and, more recently, England, were divided equally into signalmen, radiomen, pharmacist's mates, boat salvage and repair men, and underwater demolition teams.

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On June 4 we boarded USS *LST-372* with full gear, including generators and fuel for our signal lights. We were pretty sure the invasion was about to begin, although we had heard that rough weather in the Channel was causing some delay. The entire craft resembled a giant poker game with everyone playing in hushed tones. On the evening of June 5, the P.A. system came to life with the voice of General Eisenhower and his "Great Crusade" speech. There was no yelling and cheering, but I could feel a general consensus around me: "All right, then. Let's get on with it."

At daybreak on June 6th, I looked about me to see what can only be described as a scene from a Buck Rogers comic book. As far as the eye could see, there were ships: cruisers, destroyers, transports, tankers, freighters, and hundreds upon hundreds of landing craft—LSTs, LCIs, LCTs, LSMs, LCVPs. Some two thousand in all.

The combat ships were hurling tons of shells against the beach. From overhead, U.S. and British planes were raining bombs upon the concrete pillboxes, and rockets from the LSM(R)s were flashing like a thousand sabres at the hilly terrain behind the beach. All this time, men were clambering down cargo nets hanging from the sides of LSTs into smaller landing craft.

On my LST we were given a plan for disembarking. We would go in five waves of one hundred men. Each wave would consist of twenty men from each of the five components of our battalion. The first wave would leave at H-Hour, the second at H+1, the third at H+2, and so on. Muster was called, and my designation was given: H+4. I was to land in the 5th hour of attack on D-Day, at about 1100 hours.

There was barely time to say goodbye to our buddies. Things were moving fast. There was equipment to check and adjust. We each carried a full field pack plus cartridge belt. We each wore a Mae West life belt and carried a carbine, a gas mask, and a pair of semaphore flags tucked in our belts. Over our fatigues, we wore a blue suit of "impregnated" (gas-proof) clothing and a cloth arm-band supposed to detect the presence of poison gas. Some men were also assigned generator parts or binoculars to carry.

As H+4 approached, I found myself wondering about my fate. I had turned eighteen in January, was five foot three inches tall, and

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signal station. I was walking parallel with the beach when I was overtaken by a group of German POWs closely guarded by American soldiers. They were doing double-time, hands held over their heads. There had been several days without rain. Quite a bit of dust was being kicked up by their movement. As they passed me, one prisoner jumped out of formation and ran along behind, choking, and coughing as though allergic to the cloud of dust he had been engulfed in.

One of the guards, noticing him, ran back to him and slammed his gun butt against the prisoner's temple. He fell heavily onto the sweltering sand. The guard left him and ran back to join the group. I walked over and looked at his silent form. The hot sun had already begun to bake a thin trickle of blood that flowed downward in a wavy line from the prisoner's ear. At my station, I told the incident to my superiors. I heard nothing more of the German's fate.

On July 19, I was informed by V-mail of the death of my first cousin, Private Bob Whitlock, on July 11, somewhere in France. We were the same age and had grown up together. But I had gone into the Navy, and he into the Army. I thought of the many weekends we had spent on the farm and in the timber at Grandpa Whitlock's home near Nortonville. War, I thought, has no heroes—only victims.

One night, we received a message by blinker light that said: "Send MPs at once." It came from a freighter far out to our left, which we knew had been unloading ammo into smaller craft for transport to the beach and then to the front. We informed the detachment of MPs in the nearby chateau, and they dispatched two patrol boats to the scene.

When they returned, they had in custody several very drunk soldiers, who had been assigned the job of unloading the ammo. They had somehow obtained a quantity of medical alcohol from the ship's pharmacy, laced it with fruit juice, and had a party. The ship's captain had called for help when the men began to toss the large shells into the Channel.

You must realize that all I am reporting happened on a few hundred yards of Omaha Beach. There were other signal-stations manned by the 7th Beach Battalion all along Omaha, whose men were experiencing similar incidents. And I assume there were other

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